

Teaching Functional Language for Business Purposes

Alina Popescu

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania
alinadpopescu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present paper discusses English language teaching with a focus on functional language. ESP teachers have a useful tool when using this approach that enables them to improve the students' communication skills in the field of business without the pressure of rigid grammar rules. Drilling dialogues may eventually give way to innovation once learners master the given sets of phrases. The importance of context and formality is also taken into account for a better understanding of how language functions.

Key words: functional language, language teaching, communication skills

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1. Introduction

Apologizing, agreeing, disagreeing, giving advice are only several examples of the functions that language performs in everyday situations. As far as students learning business English are concerned, they need to be able to communicate effectively and be aware of the functions performed by language. Specific functional language becomes a necessity when coping in a job market dominated by English speakers. As we are going to see in the next sections, functional language is an important part of language teaching and learning. Practical examples of such an approach will also be provided in order to support functional language lessons.

2. Theoretical background

Language teaching can be approached from a more functional point of view and it is closely related to the communicative approach. In this sense, Margie Berns (1983, pp. 7-8) identifies three basic concepts, namely:

1. *context of situation*, which involves the idea that we should use authentic language not idealized one, meaning the one that cannot be used for interaction,
2. *function* which accounts for “the complexities of language in actual use” , and
3. *meaning potential*, the concept which offers insight into language.

The speaker's behavior options are influenced by the social context and these options may be either verbal or nonverbal. Moreover, the behavior options are analyzed according to degree of “appropriacy (Berns, 1983, p. 9). Discussing the field of education, this is seen as an area of “social concern where language is involved” (Berns, 1983, p. 10). He also discusses about a notional syllabus which is considered to be an improved version of both the grammatical syllabus form and a situational syllabus. This is because the learner is taught not only forms of the language but the forms that are appropriate to one's immediate needs so he or she is to be taught only those forms which are seen as relevant “the necessary functions, or uses, of language”. To conclude, “what the learners were to do with the language what meanings they would need to communicate through language” (Berns, 1983, p.11).

With Berns, it is vital that language interaction should be considered in order to develop the students' communicative skills. He states that “...only context gives meaning to form and function an makes it possible for us to make any sense out of any instance of language” (Berns, 1983, p.20).

3. Research methodology

Communicative tasks can be easily achieved when learners use functional language. What combinations the so-called ‘chunks of language’ can be associated with real life situations instead of simply presenting students with individual words or dull grammar rules. Associating language items with this purpose these may be used, certainly helps learners develop their communication skills in both speaking and writing because they are easier to memorize. In this way, however complex grammar they may involve, phrases are perceived as practical tools to express the speaker's intentions: to offer advice to request info to make suggestions to ask for help and so on. Currently, we are witnessing a trend as far as the coursebooks are concerned. For example, *The Market Leader* series has replaced much of its rigid grammar rules with more contextually based uses of tenses. The coursebook that is targeted for intermediate-level (B1) students of business English makes use of different tenses that can be used in order to describe this approach. Another example is explaining the role of conditional sentences making a promise or threat when the first conditional is used or negotiating the second conditional (see Cotton *et al*, 2015, p. 86). Besides, the final section of every unit focuses on specific situations in the useful language box and here are provided some sets of phrases for learners to study. The background is always colored and the situations are written in bold to make a greater visual impact. Unit 9 (“International Markets”) explains the uses of conditional sentences and some of the structures used to exemplify the theoretical aspects presented in the language review section are recycled in this section in order to make offers and concessions: e.g. “If you order now, will give you a discount.” or “We’d be prepared to offer you a better price if you increased your order.” Another function is checking understanding and conditional sentences that served his purpose are offered as examples “if I understand you correctly....”, “You mean, if we ordered..., would...? A third function included in this language box is following up on deal and the conditional structure used to exemplify it is “If there are any other points, I'll email you.” (Cotton *et al*, 2015, p. 88).

Role playing and dialogues create a context where the degree of formality vary along with situations. There are two axes that need to be taken into account when selecting functional language to be taught: the first coordinate is students’ level of English and the second one concerns the academic syllabus.

Exercise A in Unit 9 (Cotton *et al*, 2015, p. 88, requests that negotiation should be roleplayed and the situation given to student A sounds like this: You are a handbag supplier. Because there is strong demand for your new range of handbags you want to

- increase your list prices by 20%
- increase your delivery time to three weeks
- only offer the buyer a one-year contract

Student B receives the following set of instructions: You are a buyer for department store because the market for handbags is very competitive, you want to:

- paid the same price this year as last year
- have a shorter delivery time of two weeks
- get a three year contract with the supplier. (Cotton *et al*, 2015, p. 138)

As, it can be seen, negotiating is considered the type of functional language most appropriate for the intermediate level of learners and it consolidates the use of conditional sentences.

4. Findings

The functional language to be analyzed in the following section is making a complaint and functions are making an apology and accepting excuses.

The level of formality as far as Business English is concerned has to take into account A. the written versus the spoken context and B. the relationship between interlocutors meaning the speaker versus the listener or the sender versus a receiver.

The phrase or the element needs to be appropriate when using certain situations. This exponent is formal or informal and it would be suitable when not used between two friends or coworkers or business partners etc.

The formality is a trait linked to the length a phrase or exponent--the shorter the phrase the less formal its use. The danger of using formal phrases in excess is that they create a cold atmosphere and communication becomes distanced. The recommendation is using neutral exponents in order to avoid this unpleasant outcome.

Students can create their own dialogues as a warming up activity they may practice a drill or and brainstorm functional language check the pronunciation and recycle the functional language they have already learned. To achieve this easier, a good idea would be having prepared sets of functional language in their notebooks. For example, a complaining and apologizing language sheet will include what combinations that may be used when making a complaint apologizing explaining making a promise asking for feedback and even calming someone down.

Making a complaint

I'm afraid I have to make a complaint.

I'd like to make a complaint.

I'm sorry to trouble you but...

I've got a bit of a problem, you see...

Excuse me, there appears/seems to be something wrong with...

Apologizing

I'm sorry...

I apologize.../My apologies...

I would like to apologize for the inconvenience.

Please accept my sincerest apologies for

Asking for feedback

Please tell me exactly what the problem is.

Can you tell me what happened?

Did everything workout to your satisfaction?

Has your problem been solved

Calming someone down

I'm sure that we can sort it out.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention.

We appreciate your opinion.

I suggest that we should see what can be done.

(Adapted from <<https://www.teach-this.com/functional-activities-worksheets/complaining-apologizing>>)

Following this activity, a logical step is to provide them with a function such as making an offer or a complaint. The aim is to practice the functional language of offering or complaining. The procedure goes like this--once the function being chosen, each student needs to write several pieces of info on a piece of paper including a first name a family name a job title or location. All this extra information can be included in a file that can include background details. It must reach a deal on the best possible terms while seeking to build a long-term relationship with the customer. This time students are going to deal with a complaint, but, first of all, they have to identify the priorities and they also have to work out their own strategies and tactics. Finally, when dealing with a complaint they should focus on getting the best deal for their company. Improvising is a valid option, and it is important not to be criticized for one's mistakes. The drill offered for practice may include some words written in bold and it is precisely those words who may be replaced at will in the second stage of the practice.

Representative Good morning. You've reached customer service. Please tell me exactly what the problem is.

Manager: Hello I have a complaint about **an order**, and I wanted to make sure your company will fix the problem.

Representative: Our customers' satisfaction is important to us. Can you tell me what's wrong with your **order**?

Manager: I paid for **express shipping**, but I still haven't received my **order** for seven days.

Representative: Let me apologize on my company's behalf; we deeply regret this situation. How may I help you?

Manager: Is it possible for you to **refund my shipping costs**?

Representative: I'm sure that we can sort it out. What about **including a discount on your next order**. Can you tell me your account info?

Manager: My name is **George Smith** and my account number is **381 411 95**.

Representative: Thank you **Mr. Smith**. Your **request** is on the way.

Manager: That sounds perfect.

Representative: Are there any other questions I can answer for you?

Manager: Now that covers it. Thanks for your help!

(Adapted from Evans *et al*, 2013, p. 16)

It is important for the learners to further identify appropriate contexts in order to practice the chunks of language in the real world. In this way, the pattern is adapted and the proper nouns, the activities or any other reference is to be placed accordingly.

In the dialogue above, the focus is not on grammar but on the functional elements, more exactly suggesting, requesting information and apologizing.

If we focus on grammar this dialogue could be used to highlight the use of modal verbs to make polite requests and word-order in interrogative sentences. On the other hand, if we focus on function, this could be dealing with a complaint and offering compensation. Other phrases that can be included are listed in the previous section.

5. Conclusions

So far, we have seen how dialogues may help students practice language function such as complaining and apologizing without the pressure of grammar rules and enjoying an interactive activity. After working in pairs and practicing complaints or requests they may create their own mini dialogues using the drill. Other options would be using pictures or cards for the background information. In this way they may role play these dialogues to the class. The students are encouraged to use the useful phrases written in their notebooks but also to use their imagination and adapt various structures. Particular attention is to be given to pronunciation but also to the degree of formality that should be used in such a context.

6. References

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